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# *Research Services in Congress and Parliament*

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*Canadian and American legislators work within the context of very different institutions but they face many of the same problems — controlling expenditures, scrutiny and control of the executive, setting the rules to ensure fair elections and so on. For assistance they may call upon non partisan research staff attached to the Congressional Research Service or the Library of Parliament. This article outlines the way these different services pursue their common mandate.*

**T**he Congressional Research Service is the department of the Library of Congress that serves the Congress of the United States exclusively. The Library itself, created in 1800 as Congress' own library, has always provided information to the Members of Congress, faithful to the lofty words of the chairman of the first Joint Committee on the Library, Senator Samuel Latham Mitchell, who recommended acquisition of "such materials as will enable statesmen to be correct in their investigation and, by a becoming display of erudition and research, give a higher dignity and a brighter luster to truth." This Enlightenment ideal of government as an art as well as a profession, requiring the fullest range of human knowledge for its proper exercise, animated the founders of the Library as of the Republic itself. It is reflected in Jefferson, whose private library — purchased by the Congress in 1814 after the burning of the Capitol — reconstituted the Library's collection: "I know," he wrote, "that laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times."

It was not, however, until 1914, by which time the Library had become the national library, that a discrete unit was

established in the Library exclusively to serve the Members' needs. And as recently as 1946, the Congress decided to make the Service a separate Library department, called the Legislative Reference Service, and to require by law the performance of important new duties: (1) to advise and assist committees and Members in the analysis, appraisal, and evaluation of legislative proposals; (2) to classify, analyze and provide information of use to the Members and committees upon their request or in anticipation of such requests; and (3) to prepare summaries and digests of committee hearings and public bills and resolution. The 1946 statute also authorized the hiring of "senior specialists" in such subject areas as agriculture, law, education, government, housing, international affairs, labour, money and banking, national defense, science, taxation, and transportation.

In the late 1960s the Congress took a fresh look at the Service in the light of the huge expansion of the Executive Branch in two decades following World War II. It decided that further growth of the Service was needed if the Congress was to maintain its status as an equal branch, with access to equivalent sources of information and analysis. The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 changed the name to Congressional Research Service, added new duties in support of Congressional Committees, and put in motion a process intended to triple the size of the Service. The staff population of 330 in 1970 grew to 868 in 1980. Through all

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this change and expansion, the Service has continued to pursue the goal stated by Jefferson for the Library as a whole but, since 1914, with a legislative focus, broadly conceived: "there is, in fact," he noted, "no subject to which a Member of Congress may not have occasion to refer."

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The origin of the Library of Parliament predates Confederation and can be traced back to 1791 when the Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada wrote to the President of the Royal Society requesting money "for books as might be useful in the colony". In 1841, Upper and Lower Canada united and their libraries merged. The magnificent Library building of Italian gothic architecture was opened in 1876. It was the only part of the Parliament Buildings to survive the 1916 fire.

The Library of Parliament served as Canada's national library until 1952, when the National Library was created, and its right of legal deposit continued until 1969. Now the Library of Parliament serves a clientele limited to Senators, Members of the House of Commons, their staff, officers of the two Houses, the Justices of the Supreme Court, the Federal Court, the Governor General, Members of the Privy Council and the Parliamentary Press Gallery. The services of its Research Branch are restricted to parliamentarians. Administratively, the Library of Parliament is a separate unit of Parliament, whose authority is derived from the *Parliament of Canada Act* (R.S.C. 1985, c. P-1). The Parliamentary Librarian has the rank of a deputy head of a department and is appointed by the Governor-in-Council to hold office "during pleasure." He reports directly to the Speakers of the two Houses of Parliament, who are charged with the direction and control of the Library.

Until 1965, the Library provided only regular library services including information and reference service. In that year, the Special Committee on Procedure and Organization recommended that "immediate steps should be taken to improve the provision of research facilities for Members. Ideally, at least one research assistant should be appointed for every ten Members of Parliament. Their functions would include the preparation of statistical data, the investigation of the pros and cons of any argument referred to them, the summarizing of press comment, and the provision of notes for speeches. A translation service would also be desirable within the research organization." This recommendation was implemented by the Parliamentary Librarian, the Research Branch was established and, after a competition, a director was appointed.

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## Services

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About two-thirds of the Congressional Research Service's staff are analysts and specialists: lawyers, economists,

political scientists, engineers and scientists; specialists in foreign affairs and national defense; agriculture, energy, environmental protection and natural resources; banking, housing, labour, international trade, communications, transportation and taxation, science and technology, health, education, and welfare – all of the policy areas of concern to the Congress. They are organized into seven research divisions: American Law, Economics, Education and Public Welfare, Environment and Natural Resources, Foreign Affairs and National Defense, Government, and Science Policy.

***"CRS specialists are in the business of policy analysis: the evaluation of proposals addressing perceived public needs or problems."***

The range of policy areas is broad, literally from "abortion" to "zoning". The specialist's response may take many forms, ranging from a telephone discussion with a Member to a report to a committee chairman that may take months to prepare. And while most of the specialist's work is in direct response to requests from Members and committees, much of it is done in anticipation of requests. This is so that when an issue is ready for attention by the Congress, many Members can call upon us for instant information and prompt analysis. To respond in a timely way to numerous requests on "hot" issues, CRS specialists prepare two kinds of anticipatory products: Issue Briefs and CRS Reports.

The Issue Brief is the "flagship" of CRS' line of products. Produced through an on-line computer data base, issue briefs are constantly updated papers on issues pending before Congress. They range from eight to 15 pages, and set forth background information, analysis, a chronology of legislative action, and a bibliography. There are about 400 issue briefs in the system at any one time. The full text of each brief is available on terminals in Members' offices, as well as in hard copy. We send to Members about 200,000 issue briefs each year.

The CRS Report is designed to provide more in-depth analysis of issues, as well as to provide information on issues that are more static and thus need less frequent updating. We maintain about 1,500 reports in our product file, and about 75,000 copies are delivered to Members each year.

To make the products as accessible as possible, we list them, with order numbers, in a catalog called *Guide to CRS Products*, which is issued quarterly and is updated in a cumulative monthly publication called *Update*. We are in the process of developing an on-line data base that will make the Guide available on terminals.

A final program that deserves mention in a discussion of the CRS research effort is our Major Issues Tracking System.

At the start of the 100th Congress in 1987, we put in place a system designed to focus on the key issues of Congressional concern and to provide more comprehensive, integrated, and interdisciplinary products to assist the Congress in dealing with those issues. Teams of analysts from all disciplines are brought together to produce special issue briefs and other products on the issues. At this writing, the issues we are tracking in this way are: Aids, Air Quality, Arctic Resources Controversy, Arms Control, Aviation Safety, Campaign Financing, Central American Peace Prospects, Child Day Care, Defense Procurement Investigation, Defense Spending Priorities, Deficit Reduction, Drug Control, Economic Conditions, Education: Federal Concerns, Farm Problems, Health Care, Persian Gulf, SDI, Trade and Welfare.

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In Canada, the Research Branch of the Library of Parliament has 86 personnel including some 55 research officers organized in four Divisions: Economics, Law and Government, Political and Social Affairs, and Science and Technology. The Branch also has English and French language editors.

Each Division responds to requests within the general area denoted by its title. While officers are specialists in particular areas, they are expected to work on a broad range of topics. The Research Branch is intended as a counterbalance and supplement to the enormous resources and large and expert staff available to the government. As Philip Laundy, former Director of the Research Branch, states:

The civil service employs many highly specialized experts providing technical advice to government in relation to a variety of specific programmes. The needs of parliamentarians are directed more towards broad policy issues and a comprehensive understanding of the more precise questions embodied in legislation and departmental projects ... In addition they require a form of service which has no departmental counterpart, relating to constituency problems and areas of public affairs in which the government has no specific programmes or commitments.

The professional staff of the Branch are highly educated and trained: they hold a Master's degree or equivalent and many have advanced or multiple degrees. Their extensive professional and academic qualifications include: Ph.D's in economics, political science, phytopathology; membership in four provincial bars; Master's degrees in geophysics, botany, agriculture, geomorphology, water resources, law, sociology, history, political science, economics, philosophy; other degrees in commerce, chartered accountancy, urban planning, chemistry. Interpersonal and communication skills are also important. Recruitment of professionals is national

in scope and the staff represent a geographical cross-section of the country.

The Research Branch responds to questions from parliamentarians related to their work in the chamber, in committee, in caucus, in their constituency, or as a member of a parliamentary association or delegation. The services of the Branch are provided without partisan bias. Material is prepared in an objective and impartial manner but will stress a particular viewpoint or orientation if desired to the extent that this is consistent with factual accuracy. All reports prepared for individual members and committees are confidential and will not be released without permission. Services are provided in both official languages.

***"Parliamentarians request studies involving public policy issues; statistical and economic analysis and interpretation; assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of a policy option; a professional judgment, explanation or interpretation; comparative analysis of legislation from other jurisdictions."***

It is not within the mandate of the service to provide personal legal or medical advice, to undertake work directly for constituents, to provide personal information concerning members of the two Houses of Parliament or to draft bills (although we do assist in preparing legislative proposals). Whether the result of a request is a telephone conversation with a member, a brief 2-3 page memorandum, or an extensive 50-page report, researchers are expected to handle each request in an accurate, objective, and timely manner.

Anticipation and personal initiative in the provision of information are also important aspects in ensuring an effective service. The Research Branch has several self-initiated programmes to provide members with studies on current subjects and developing issues. Whereas a request from a parliamentarian involves one or more officers directly assisting one member, an internally generated report will reach a much wider clientele and may obviate several separate requests. Such reports also stimulate interest in a subject and may result in follow-up requests. Publications available for general distribution to Parliamentarians include: *Current Issue Reviews* which are descriptive commentaries on topical issues in a 10-15 page paper which is updated regularly. Each CIR includes a discussion of the issue, a chronology of events, details of the action taken in Parliament and a select reading list; *Legislative Summaries* which provide information on major Bills and include the background to the legislation, its history and purpose, analysis of the important clauses, and commentaries from various sources; *Mini-Reviews* are very brief (5 page) papers

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on fast breaking events or other informational matters such as a court decision, an economic update, or a conference report; and *Backgrounders* which are lengthier, in-depth studies of a topic.

A regularly updated bibliography of Research Branch studies, which are available for general distribution to parliamentarians, is distributed at the beginning of each month when Parliament is in session. It includes summaries of all new papers.

The Library has an arrangement with the Canadian Government Publishing Centre, Department of Supply and Services, through which Research Branch *Backgrounders* and *Current Issue Reviews* may be purchased by the public. These publications are advertised several times a year in the Special and Weekly Checklists of Canadian Government Publications. Depository institutions receive free copies through this program.

The Branch's other major service is to provide professional research staff to assist parliamentary committees. Most of the currently active committees in Parliament are staffed by the Research Branch. This represents a significantly increasing level of assistance from five years ago and reflects the recognition by committees of the need for professional staff due to a considerable extent to the changes to the Committee system emanating from the recommendations of the Special Committee on Reform of the House of Commons (McGrath Committee, 1985). Whereas the Research Branch staffs a number of standing committees with the same individuals on an ongoing basis, other committees are provided assistance on a reference by reference arrangement on request.

The type of work undertaken varies according to the individual requirements and expressed needs of each committee. Examples include: assistance in drawing up a plan of action and schedule for committee hearings; preparing a proposed list of witnesses to be heard by the committee, often with background information on each group or individual; briefing papers outlining the issues involved in the reference; briefing notes for committee hearings which include biographies of the witnesses, summaries of briefs, suggested lines of questioning; oral briefings to committees and consultations with and advice to individual members; in-depth papers on specific issues; collations and analysis of evidence; briefing binders, which often include comparative charts, commentaries on issues or the evidence, original papers, periodical articles; draft reports; press releases; briefing session on the report prior to or after its release.

Knowledge of the process and the personal qualities necessary to work in a political environment are important considerations in staffing committees. Employing professional from the Research Branch who work

permanently for Parliament means that the knowledge and experience acquired remain with the institution when the committee reference is completed and they are retained in the cumulative storehouse of knowledge at the Research Branch, ready to be tapped at any future date by other committees or individual parliamentarians.

The Research Branch has organized several public policy seminars for members and staff on timely topics. Invited specialists debate the issue and a question and answer period encourages audience participation. Topics have included "Is Our Criminal Justice Too Lenient?," "The Access to Information Act," and "Should We Have Free Trade Within Canada?". Sessions are videotaped by the House of Commons and are available on demand video through its OASIS network and at the Main Library video service. Transcripts of the proceedings and audio tapes are also available.

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## Information and Reference

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The Information and Technical Services Branch of the Library of Parliament responds to over 200 inquiries daily when Parliament sits. Response time is short, often the same day, frequently immediately. Much effort goes into anticipating needs and developing resources to meet clients' requirements. The Library holds over 650,000 printed items and subscribes to 3,000 periodicals including over 600 newspapers comprising all major Canadian dailies and most weeklies. Convenient access to staff assistance and collections is provided from six locations on the Hill as well as an off-site storage facility which houses one third of the Library's collection.

In addition to a normal library collection, bibliographies and compilations on topics of interest are routinely prepared and updated and our newspaper clipping service selects daily from over 20 Canadian papers for 3,000 current files on topics of interest to parliamentarians. Research officers and committee clerks may arrange to receive press clippings or wire releases on selected topics.

As a bilingual institution, the Library provides publications in both official languages. The Library collection emphasizes the following areas with concentration on North America and the Commonwealth: Canadian political and parliamentary affairs, government, economics, law and legislation, parliamentary history and procedure, political science, international relations, sociology and Canadiana.

This Branch also prepares a variety of publications. At the top of most MP's daily reading list is *Quorum*, a selection of newspaper clippings from English and French newspapers in Canada, which is distributed to all parliamentarians daily during the session. *Articles* contains a selective list of articles

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chosen from over 750 English and French periodicals. Full texts of the articles are provided on request. A chronology and status of bills for Senate and House legislation in separate English and French version is compiled and updated daily. A classified list of database sources most useful to parliamentarians is prepared as necessary and an annual list of Library press clipping books, bibliographies and reading lists are produced on topics of recurring interest.

Since 1979 the Library has been computerizing its catalogue of books and other materials in the collection. In addition to subjects, authors and titles, the catalogue may be searched by classification and other control numbers. Although Library staff are the prime users of the catalogue (nicknamed DOBIS for its software), clients may access the catalogue via the network on Parliament Hill or through dedicated terminals and backup microfiches in the Library. The catalogue database is mounted on a National Research Centre computer shared with other federal government libraries, notably the National Library.

Library staff are familiar with a variety of commercial and public online databases and many questions are answered with computer-assisted retrieval techniques. For example: inquiries about specific news coverage may be answered after searching online newspaper or wire service databases; the international view on "hot topics," current events or the legal perspective can be found by searching online databases.<sup>1</sup>

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In addition to policy analysis, the Congressional Research Service also provides to the Members information and reference services on a vast scale. In fact, about two-thirds of the nearly 500,000 requests the Service responded to in the last fiscal year were handled by our two reference divisions: Congressional Reference and Library Services. The Congressional Reference Division (CRD) is staffed with librarians and library technicians trained to respond to reference inquiries: those whose answer can be found in a reference work or periodical, a prepared CRS paper, one of our data bases, or the like.

The kinds of requests handled by this division are those for general factual information; books and articles; quotations, biographical information, and information about organizations (associations, business firms, and companies);

and government documents, laws, and congressional publications (hearings, reports, and committee prints).

In-person reference assistance is provided in congressional reading rooms (housed in two of the Library's buildings) and in four CRS reference centers located in congressional office buildings. In the reading rooms and reference centers, CRD makes a special effort to provide the kinds of resources that Members and congressional staff are likely to need on short notice. Browsing collections of popular books for loan, as well as collections of reference materials and current periodicals, are available in the reader facilities. A "hotline" service is provided for congressional callers needing immediate telephone help with specific facts.

The division also maintains two information distribution centers – one for each Chamber. These self-service facilities are stocked with "Info Packs" of background information on over 100 recurring topics of congressional interest. These usually contain Issue Briefs and CRS Reports, as well as journal articles helpful to the reader desiring background information on a specific topic. The centers are organized so that congressional staff can browse quickly and help themselves to relevant packets.

The Library Services Division acquires new research materials, directs the acquisition and bibliographic services for CRS, and manages reference services for CRS analysts in the seven research divisions. It also prepared bibliographies, research guides, and a Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) service, which is a weekly alerting bibliography on pre-selected topics for Members, as well as for CRS specialists.

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In the midst of these complex and varied services, both the Congressional Research Service and the Canadian Library of Parliament CRS remain dedicated to the conviction, in F.S. Oliver's words, that "politics is not one of those crafts that can be learned by the light of nature", apart from the untrammelled pursuit of knowledge that serves to inform and instruct the concerns of the men and women who bear the burden of public office in a society founded upon ordered liberty under law.■

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## Notes

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1 Margaret Montgomery, Director, Information and Technical Services Branch assisted in the preparation of this part.